Classroom Reading Instruction That Supports Struggling Readers: Key Components for Effective Teaching

The National Research Council (NRC), a group of experts convened to examine reading research and address the serious national problem of reading failure, concluded in their landmark report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) that most reading problems can be prevented by providing effective instruction and intervention in preschool and in the primary grades. The NRC noted that for students to learn to read well they must a) understand how sounds are represented by print and be able to apply this understanding to read and spell words, b) practice reading enough to become fluent readers, c) learn new vocabulary words, and d) learn to self-monitor when reading to make sure what they read makes sense and to correct their own errors. The NRC also found that it was important that teachers provide explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics integrated with many opportunities to read and write meaningful, connected text. (They purposefully used the word *integrated* rather than *balanced*. It isn't enough simply to add on components of a fragmented curriculum to balance one with another.) Finally, they noted that effective reading teachers adapt their instruction, making changes designed to meet the needs of different students.
In summary, the evidence to date shows that there are five overriding research-supported characteristics of effective instruction for students with reading difficulties. This article's focus is on identifying and then exploring in more detail each of these components of powerful instruction:

1. Teach essential skills and strategies.
   ◊ *Effective reading teachers teach skills, strategies, and concepts.*
2. Provide differentiated instruction based on assessment results and adapt instruction to meet students' needs.
   ◊ *Effective teachers recognize that one size doesn't fit all and are ready to adapt instruction—both content and methods*.
3. Provide explicit and systematic instruction with lots of practice—with and without teacher support and feedback, including cumulative practice over time.
   ◊ *Students should not have to infer what they are supposed to learn*.
4. Provide opportunities to apply skills and strategies in reading and writing meaningful text with teacher support.
   ◊ *Students need to be taught what to do when they get to a "hard word."*
5. Don't just "cover" critical content; be sure students learn it—monitor student progress regularly and reteach as necessary.
   ◊ *Effective teachers adjust their teaching accordingly to try to accelerate student progress*.

Teach the Essentials

Shortly after the NRC issued its report on the serious national problem of widespread reading difficulties (Snow et al., 1998), the National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) conducted a comprehensive analysis of existing reading research that met high standards for quality. The NRP, similarly to the NRC, concluded that reading instruction should address the domains of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Effective classroom reading instruction includes teaching phonemic awareness (in kindergarten and 1st grade, and for older students who need it) and phonics or word study explicitly and directly with opportunities to apply skills in reading and writing connected text (e.g., Ehri, 2003; Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001; Snow et al., 1998), with integrated instruction in fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (e.g., Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001; Jitendra, Edwards, Sacks, & Jacobson, 2004).

Effective reading teachers teach skills, strategies, and concepts. *Skills* are things students learn to do. In reading, students must learn skills such as associating letters with their sounds (such as saying the sound of the letter *b* and blending these sounds to form words [as in sounding out words]). *Strategies* are routines or plans of action that can be used to accomplish a goal or work through difficulty. Students can be taught strategies to use when they come to a word they don't know, strategies for spelling unknown

words, strategies to help them write summaries of paragraphs, and other kinds of strategies. A word-reading strategy is described below. Finally, students must learn *concepts*, or ideas. They need background knowledge related to reading and to the topics they are reading about.

Differentiating Instruction: Once Size Doesn't Fit All

Meeting the needs of diverse readers is no small task. In a typical 3rd grade classroom, there may be virtual nonreaders, typically developing readers, and students who read at 5th or 6th grade levels or even higher. Many classrooms in which all instruction is delivered in English include students who are learning to read and speak in English at the same time. A single classroom may include children who speak several different languages at home. Teachers address these various needs by providing *differentiated instruction*, using the results of diagnostic assessments to help them identify students' strengths and needs, forming small groups of students with similar needs, and then planning instruction to target those needs. Typically, this means that teachers implement reading instruction in small groups as well as in whole class formats.

Although a quality reading curriculum will provide the foundation for effective instruction, teachers will need to adapt their instruction for students who struggle (and for high-achieving students as well). Quality classroom reading instruction can be adapted for students who find it difficult to learn to read by a) teaching the specific skills and strategies that students need to learn, based on assessment data (sometimes called *0*); b) making instruction more explicit and systematic; c) increasing opportunities for practice; d) providing appropriate text at students' instructional reading levels (not too easy but not too hard); and e) monitoring students' mastery of key skills and strategies and reteaching when necessary.

Making Instruction More Explicit

Students with learning difficulties benefit from explicit instruction in decoding skills and strategies, fluency (modeling fluent reading, directly teaching how to interpret punctuation marks when reading orally, etc.), vocabulary word meanings and word-learning strategies, and comprehension strategies. When a teacher provides explicit instruction she or he clearly models or demonstrates skills and strategies and provides clear descriptions of new concepts (providing both clear examples and nonexamples). Students don't have to infer what they are supposed to learn. For example, a teacher who is explicitly teaching 1st grade students to sound out words demonstrates this process step by step, then provides opportunities for students to practice the skill with the teacher's feedback and support. If the student is not successful, the teacher models again. The teacher may have the students sound out a few words along with him or her. Eventually, the students apply the skill independently to sound out simple words. Students who are easily confused are more likely to be successful when teachers demonstrate and clearly explain what they need to learn. On the other hand, if confusions are not addressed and foundational skills are not mastered, it is likely that students will become more and more confused, resulting in serious reading problems.

Providing Systematic Instruction

Systematic instruction is carefully sequenced, so that easier skills are taught before more difficult skills. Letter–sound correspondences and phonics skills (i.e., sounding out words, applying the "silent e rule") are taught in a predetermined order according to a clear scope and sequence so that there are no gaps in students' learning. The pace of introduction of new material is reasonable to allow struggling learners to master key skills, and much of each lesson consists of practice of previously introduced skills, strategies, and concepts and the integration of these with the newly taught material. Students' learning is monitored, so that teachers can reteach key skills when needed.

Increasing Opportunities for Practice

Published reading programs rarely include enough practice activities for at-risk readers to master skills and strategies. Students with learning difficulties typically need extended guided, independent, and cumulative practice. During guided practice, students practice with teacher feedback. Students need both positive and corrective feedback. Specific positive feedback calls attention to behaviors and processes the student is implementing well. Students also need to know when they have made mistakes. If clear corrective feedback is not provided, students are likely to continue to make the same errors, in effect "practicing their mistakes" (Denton & Hocker, 2006, p. 17) and forming bad habits that are difficult to break. Students also need independent practice, during which they implement skills and strategies without teacher support (but with close teacher monitoring, and with reteaching when necessary). Finally, students at risk for reading difficulties need large amounts of cumulative practice over time to learn to apply skills and strategies automatically when they read, just as skilled readers do. Cumulative practice means practicing newly learned items mixed in with items learned earlier, so that skills are not taught and "dropped." Students with reading problems often need a lot of review. One effective way to provide extra practice opportunities in the reading classroom is the implementation of peer tutoring routines in which students are paired and taught how to work together to practice skills they have been taught (e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006; Saenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). There is also preliminary evidence indicating that practice in phonics and word identification may be more effective for 1st grade at-risk readers if it includes hands-on manipulation of items such as magnetic letters or word cards (Pullen, Lane, Lloyd, Nowak, & Ryals, 2005).

Applying Skills and Strategies in Meaningful Text

Clearly, it isn't enough for students to learn to read or spell lists of words. The real purpose of reading is to get meaning from text, and the purpose of writing is to convey meaning with text. It is very important that students have the opportunity to apply word identification and spelling skills as they read and write connected text. This process must be supported by teachers who model for students how to apply what they have learned and give students feedback about their reading and writing. For example, students must be taught what to do when they get to a hard word. The most common characteristic of poor readers of all ages is the tendency to guess words that are difficult, sometimes using just a few letters. Often, students make random guesses that don't make sense—then simply continue reading, apparently unaware of this fact. This quote from a middle school student, taken from a moving article about students in middle school with severe reading problems, describes the situation well:

Sometimes when students in my class read, they might know how to say simple words okay, but they will skip over the big words. They look around to see if anyone is even listening to them. But they don't fix them; they just keep going. They stumble over words, trying to sound them out. Sometimes they don't even know they made a mistake, and when they finally figure out the words, they don't have a clue what it all means. They just keep going. (McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001, p. 22)

As this student observed, it is nearly impossible for students to understand what they are reading—to get meaning from text—when they can't read the words on the page accurately and fluently. Students need explicit instruction, modeling, and practice in vocabulary and reading comprehension, but many students with reading problems continue to need instruction in phonics and word study even when they are in the upper elementary and secondary grades (Fletcher, 2007).

A critical part of effective reading instruction is explicitly teaching students how to use efficient word reading strategies. Simply put, students need to be taught what to do when they get to a hard word. In one research-validated early reading intervention program, young students are taught to use a three-part strategy when they try to read difficult words: "Look for parts you know, sound it out, and check it" (Denton & Hocker, 2006, p. 144). These steps are described in more detail below.

1. ***Look for parts of the word you know.*** In the earliest stages of learning to read, students may find a letter or a letter combination (e.g., *th*, *ing*) that they know. Later, they may recognize common word endings (e.g., *–ot* in *pot, rot, cot*). Still later, they may identify roots or base words, such as the root *spect* (which means "to see") in the words *inspect* and *spectacles*, or common prefixes and suffixes like *pre-* or *-ly*.

2. ***Sound it out.*** Students should be taught from the earliest lessons to use a sounding-out strategy to read unfamiliar words. They should learn how to blend sounds and larger word parts together to read words and how to apply this strategy when reading real text. Some teachers teach students in kindergarten or 1st grade to identify unknown words by looking at pictures on the page or at one or two letters in a word. These students are being taught to use a guessing strategy, the strategy of choice of struggling readers, as described so well by the middle school student above. If a word is too difficult for a student to sound out, the teacher can model the process of looking for known letters or word parts and sounding out the word, and then simply tell the student the word. Some reading programs include controlled text, sometimes called "decodable text," that contains only words students can read using words and letter sounds they have been previously taught in the program. This kind of text can provide a temporary support for students in the early stages of reading development.

3. ***Check it.*** After students sound out the unfamiliar word, the last step of the three-part word reading strategy is to teach students to put the newly solved word back into the sentence and to check it to be sure it makes sense. Thus, the meaning of the word in context is not ignored; it is used as the checking mechanism. Studies of skilled young readers show that this is the main way they use context—not for guessing what words are, but for checking to be sure that their reading is making sense so they can make corrections when it doesn't make sense.

Monitoring Student Progress

In schools with effective classroom reading instruction, students receive regular brief reading assessments so that their reading growth can be monitored. These assessments typically include having students read text for 1–2 minutes and calculating how many words they read correctly during that time (see Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001; Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). These results can be graphed, so that teachers, parents, and students can readily see progress over time. Classroom reading teachers can adjust their teaching accordingly to try to accelerate student progress.

For some students, quality classroom reading instruction is not enough. When progress-monitoring assessments indicate that students are not making enough progress with quality classroom reading instruction alone, schools can provide extra small-group reading intervention to ensure that all children learn to read in the early grades (see Denton & Mathes, 2003; Fletcher, Denton, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2005; Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007).

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